in search of Azure Dragons

Photographs of Chinese costume with accessories from the collections of the Royal Ontario Museum.

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When Lorna Schueler arrived in my office (our first meeting) with 500 extraordinary slides of the ROM's recent exhibit of Chinese costume, I immediately asked her, "What are the chances that you'd agree to let us circulate some of the best among these photographs?"

"I was hoping you'd say that," she replied, and that's how we began.

You'll find, here and there between the panels of Lorna's pictures, examples of Chinese embroideries, jewellery, and accessories from the Museum's collections – but it's thanks to the enthusiasm of this gifted Toronto photographer, willing to share her personal experiences and her unusual accomplishments, that you are now able to see some very special ROM material which is much too fragile to travel.

Mindful of Lorna's many difficulties courageously overcome, we decided to call this new show "in search of Azure Dragons". In China, the East is symbolized by the colour blue/green (azure) and represented by the dragon.

John E. Vollmer,
Associate Curator-in-charge,
Textile Department, ROM

in search of Azure Dragons...

The first time I walked into the dimly lit upper level of the Dragon Throne exhibition I was overwhelmed by colours – dull rich colours where the light was subdued; glittering effects where cautious beams of light shone directly on the costumes. I thought that if I were to walk under a rainbow and it exploded, the effect would be like this, with all those glowing shafts of colour suspended around me.

I have always been attracted to colour and I have some formal art training in its use, but at that moment I felt I would have to call on everything I had ever learned or considered about the properties of colour and light if I were to get the maximum enjoyment from this visual feast.

When I walked through the exhibition I was transported far away from the Royal Ontario Museum's exhibition hall in downtown Toronto to the mystery and intrigue of the Dragon Court in early morning, to the well-stocked wardrobes of wealthy Manchu, and to the workrooms that had produced these sumptuous garments in years past. The sheer power and beauty of the colours were weaving magic for me although I knew nothing about Chinese culture or art.

Before I had finished my first tour of the exhibit I knew that visiting and looking would never be enough. I wanted to record some of those incredible designs and colours. I wanted to capture the overall mood that had been created by the people who had mounted the display.

I returned on my next lunch hour with my camera and finished a roll of film in fifteen minutes. But I had recorded only two garments!

the chinese character, shou, symbol of longevity

I returned again and again – on lunch hours, after work, sometimes on Tuesday evenings when the exhibit stayed open late, often on weekends.

It was like chasing the proverbial carrot! The more I peered through the view-finder and clicked the shutter, the more I found to photograph. The more I photographed, the more new delights I discovered which had to be explored and recorded. Back I would go to the exhibition.

Time flew by. The closing date loomed, menacing as an angry emperor, but I wasn't finished with my task! Then the closing date was postponed for another month and I got a reprieve!

In the final month my involvement with the exhibit broadened. I began to think of all the people, even those in Toronto, who would not visit the exhibition even once for one reason or another. Many people throughout Ontario would miss the opportunity of seeing these beautiful garments in such breathtaking settings. The garments are priceless and may not travel. They had not been out of protective storage as a group in thirty years and after the exhibition they would be returned to storage for safekeeping.

I decided to concentrate on putting together a collection of my own. I hoped a selection of my slides (and maybe, later, prints from those slides) might capture the mood of the exhibit, as well as details of the costumes. Perhaps in my own way I could capture the drama of being in the presence of the Dragon Throne as the Museum had done. Then my photographic images could be shared with others when the exhibit was only a memory.

On the day the exhibit closed I was there for one last frantic session. There was still so much to record – a few more exquisitely embroidered bats, a few more details from the bride's incredibly red dress, another shot of the three-legged toad, and...but I had run out of film! It was closing time. I took one more quick stroll through the exhibition hall and departed. I had nearly 500 slides that would transport me, and I hoped others with me, again and again to the presence of the Dragon Throne.

Lorna Moor Schueler
Toronto, January 1978

The Empress Dowager, Tz'u-hsi, walking in her snowy garden.

courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

attuned to the seasons

Within the halls and courtyards of the Forbidden City the Son of Heaven sat upon the Dragon Throne and ruled the Central Flowery Kingdom behind high walls hidden from the casual glance of mere mortals. Order and stability were transmitted throughout the realm by a bureaucracy of thousands. These courtiers, functionaries, and officers were charged with the actual governing of China. They gathered taxes, distributed goods and services, enforced laws, and administered justice in the name of the emperor.

The Manchu dynasty, called Ch'ing (pure), had been established in 1644 when a small group of nomadic warriors swept across the Great Wall to claim the mandate by which one of the world's mightiest empires was ruled. Throughout the eighteenth century the Manchu government provided peace and prosperity; but fortunes changed and Heaven withdrew the mandate. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the once mighty Manchu empire had been reduced to the point of collapse.

Amid imperial decline, financial ruin, and the threat of foreign domination that undermined the power of the Manchu government, the private court of China's last empress preserved the elegance and taste associated with centuries of imperial rule. Within the secluded gardens and private apartments of the Forbidden City and in the imperial park outside Peking, which contained the summer palaces, the twilight of Manchu authority witnessed a brilliant period of luxury and refinement.

Tz'u-hsi, the Empress Dowager, had become the most powerful woman in China. In the 1860s her status as concubine in the imperial harem changed abruptly when she gave birth to the first male heir of the Hsien-feng emperor. She came to power as regent to her infant son and through skill and intrigue maintained supreme political authority until her death in 1908.

In the declining years of the Manchu dynasty only she could command the wealth to maintain the outward forms of an imperial tradition 2,000

plum – winter

tree peony – spring

lotus – summer

chrysanthemum – fall

years old. The luxury products of urban civilization had always been used by the court to demonstrate the superiority of the Chinese state and to enhance the prestige of the imperial household. Fine clothes were essential to any demonstration of refinement, and in China this implied clothing made of costly silk.

In Tz'u-hsi's court, costume was a celebration of sumptuous luxury. Stress was placed on the richness of materials and the refinement of ornament. A particular garment's colour and decoration were the result of a carefully calculated balance of contrasts and harmonies. Pictorial ornament, often embroidered with the most exacting skill, reflected a sympathetic observation of the sensuous world: birds flew and animals crouched and scampered, flowers grew with informal grace. Taste was marked by the brilliance with which colour and ornament were orchestrated within a framework attuned to the seasonal variations of nature. Needle and thread created poems without words. Butterflies embroidered in tones of blue and white on a blue silk coat in this exhibition might have suggested wishes for happiness or long life. The precise meaning would have depended on the age of the wearer or on the occasion for which it was made. The butterfly was a symbol of conjugal felicity. Butterfly *(tieh)* also formed a verbal pun with the word *tieh* meaning seventy years old. By retaining a blue tonality stress was placed on seasonal associations, in this case spring. Black silk bindings emphasized garment shapes and acted as a frame for the composition; but they too echoed the theme of felicity and spring by combining butterflies with hydrangea.

While wrapped in the elegance of taste and prestige, this aesthetic refinement also expressed more fundamental cosmic principles. In the Chinese view the universe consisted of Heaven, earth (nature), and man. Each had to be balanced with the others to ensure harmony, order, and stability.

The clothing worn at court demonstrated the Manchu acceptance of Chinese costuming principles and served as testimony to the dilemma of having to assume a Chinese identity which was faced by all nomadic conquerors. Within three years of Tz'u-hsi's death the Chinese threw off the yoke of Manchu domination and the tradition of Chinese empire became history.

butterfly

hydrangea

costume as symbol

In traditional Chinese society, as in our own, garments served as symbols to identify and differentiate ethnic origins, social classes, and political structures. Traditional costume or national dress embodies the continuity of a people's life-style, its social mores, cultural values, and technological developments. In part, people derive their identity from the clothing they wear. Kinship, rank, political function, and social occasion are frequently expressed by a particular costume.

Outside the imperial Manchu court where law governed costume, Chinese custom and tradition prevailed. A Chinese bride was dressed in trousseau gifts of red silk cut in the style of ancient Chinese court clothes. Red had been the dynastic colour of the preceding Ming Dynasty. The colour and the ultra-nationalistic flowing full-sleeved coat used at the Ming court were considered anti-Manchu. Consequently they were banned from official use by the Manchu emperors.

On the day of her marriage, a Chinese bride was honoured as "empress for a day". This reflected the philosophical view that marriage within society mirrored the roles of the emperor and his consort, who were the political parents of the state. It was appropriate that bridal attire was embellished with imperial symbols.

In this context the emperor's dragon and the empress's phoenix symbolized the groom and bride, the balance between masculine and feminine, the *yin* and *yang*.

Marriage was central to the family structure on which traditional Chinese society was based.

dragon and phoenix

one hundred children

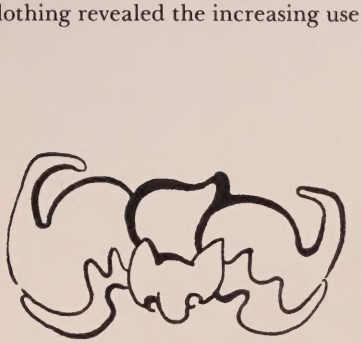
Marriage ensured the continuity of the family by providing descendants – many wedding symbols stress notions of progeny. Gourds have many seeds, as do pomegranates and melons. The theme of "one hundred children" is an obvious marriage decoration; in the Chinese male-dominated society all of the children were depicted as boys.

Children not only provided continuity for the future, but were the link to the past. Children ensured that ancestors would be honoured to bring all the benefits of Heaven's grace to the family. Children would also provide for the care of their parents in old age. This notion of continuity supported the Confucian institution of filial piety. Filial conduct demonstrated reverence for and inspired the symbolism of longevity.

Throughout the two-and-a-half centuries of Manchu rule, both official and unofficial clothing revealed the increasing use of a very complex and sophisticated pictorial symbolism. The Chinese language permitted verbal puns to be worked out as rebuses using pictorial emblems (which had the same pronunciation as other words) to form phrases evoking auspicious wishes for happiness, longevity, and wealth.

Red was the colour traditionally associated with family celebration, particularly weddings and births. The word for happiness is pronounced *fu*. Although written differently, the word for bat is also pronounced *fu;* hence a red bat symbolizes wishes for happiness. A red bat with a peach, a symbol of immortality, means happiness and long life.

This literary taste marks a level of sophistication few cultures have achieved; yet its increasing use during the declining years of the Manchu dynasty reflects growing superstition and an increasing lack of control of Manchu fortunes.



a bat (fu)
for happiness (fu)

good wishes for a
long life as you desire

the ling-chih fungus,
symbol of longevity

ruling in harmony with the universe

The political reality of Chinese empire dates from the third century B.C. although many of the characteristic features of empire are considerably older. The emergence of an organized agrarian society on the central Chinese plains during the second millenium B.C. imposed a sedentary life-style and encouraged the growth of large urban centres, a stratified society, and the rich material culture that characterized Chinese civilization.

Agriculture tied the Chinese life-style to the land and stressed continuity. Many Chinese cultural traditions honoured the past and imposed uniformity, insulating China against change. Empire was based on belief in the superiority of the Chinese way of life and the civilizing influence it exerted on all. Within this sphere of influence men were either civilized and Chinese, or barbarians.

Central to the notion of empire was the role of the emperor, whose mandate, or right to rule so long as he remained virtuous rather than his individuality, remained critical to the survival of the state. The *t'ien-ming* (mandate of Heaven) ensured the harmonious order required for the state and the good of all. Only through its correct application could the forces of the natural world be balanced with the needs of man.

The rights and ceremonies associated with the emperor and his court were the obligations of the mandate. These functions, reportedly traced back to the times of the legendary emperors who created Chinese civilization, were the solemn affirmations of the splendour and superiority of the empire. These events were conducted within courts and halls laid out according to the points of the compass. The precision and order displayed in such arrangements as the Forbidden City symbolized the state's power to maintain order in the universe. The elaborate architectural settings, sumptuous robes, and gleaming lacquers reflected the refinements of urban life, as well as the power of an autocratic state. These trappings were intended to impress crude nomads and tributaries with the power and wealth of the state and to overwhelm barbarians with the reality of civilization.

The Manchu were originally steppe nomads. Unlike their Chinese neighbours, their way of life stressed independance and mobility. Function, rather than ostentatious refinement, guided the design of clothes, horse trappings, and tent furnishings. Manchu identity as horse-riding warriors was in part ensured by their trousers, boots, and fitted riding coats.

As conquerors of China, the Manchu had been able to preserve a separate ethnic identity through the regulation of costume; however, as emperors of the state, they were obliged to continue the rites and ceremonies required by the mandate of Heaven. Accordingly the Manchu used ancient Chinese imperial symbols to decorate their clothes. These included elements of the universe - water, earth, and sky, as well as the dragon, emblem of Chinese imperial authority.

The coat worn at court symbolized the universe.

The lower border of diagonal bands and rounded billows represented water; at the four axes of the coat, which symbolized the cardinal points of the compass, rose prism-shaped rocks symbolizing the earth-mountain. Above, the cloud-filled heaven against which dragons coiled and twisted.

This cosmic symbolism was complete only when the coat was worn. The human body became the world axis; the neck opening, the gate of Heaven, separated the material world of the coat from the realm of the spiritual represented by the wearer's head. Implicit is the notion of harmony and universal order. On an immediate personal level each courtier was constantly reminded by the coat he wore of his duty and subservience to the throne and its mandate.

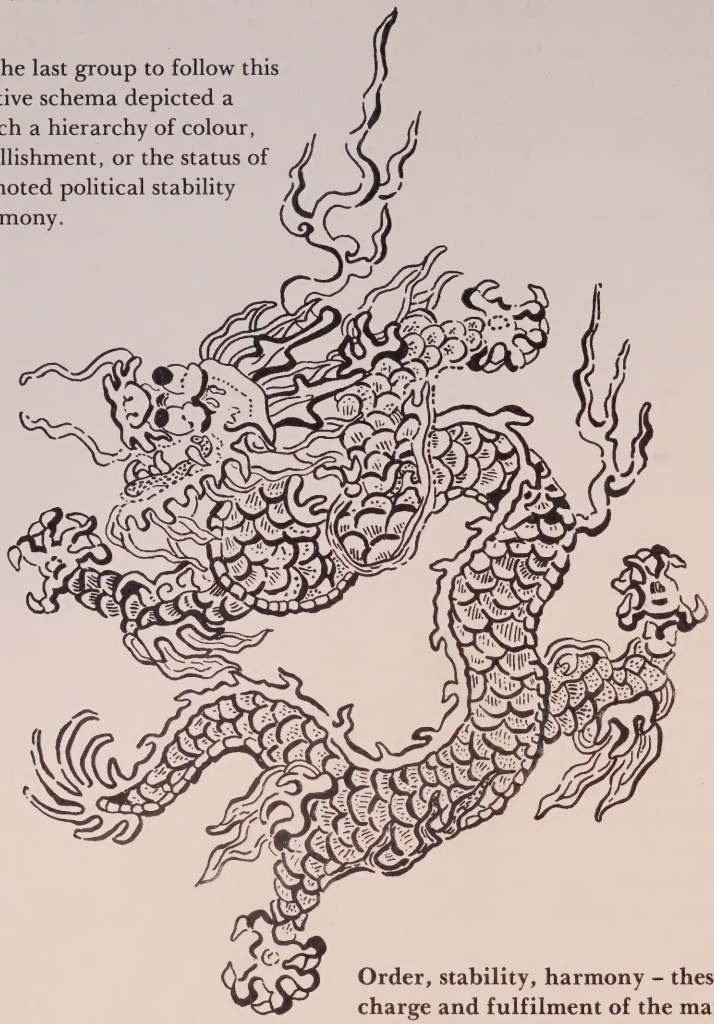
Imperial edicts concerning costume were promulgated in 1759. These regulated the court costume appropriate for each court function worn by each rank of courtier, official, and officer in the service of the Manchu government. Although the preface to these edicts carried a warning that Manchu identity was linked to its clothing, many of the regulations were borrowed directly from Chinese precedent. The addition of the twelve symbols of ancient Chinese imperial authority to the Manchu emperor's clothing was one of the more significant changes. These symbols were related to the sacrificial obligations of the emperor.

Symbols for the sun and moon at the shoulders and for the constellation and mountain at the chest and back denoted the four principal annual sacrifices made by the emperor on behalf of the state. The *fu* symbol and axe denoted temporal power; the paired dragons and pheasant, dominion over the natural world. The water weed, libation cups, flame, plate of millet, and the mountain at the back symbolized the five elements of the universe: water, metal, fire, plant life (by extension, wood), and earth.

The use of pictorial insignia badges to designate all ranks was also adopted from Chinese custom. Manchu nobles wore dragon badges associated with imperial power at the chest and centre back of dark-coloured surcoats worn at court. The nine ranks of civil officials were indicated by bird badges; animal badges distinguished the ranks of military officers.

Throughout history court attire was a Chinese political symbol.

The Manchu were the last group to follow this tradition. The decorative schema depicted a universal order in which a hierarchy of colour, the lavishness of embellishment, or the status of secondary motifs promoted political stability leading to a social harmony.



Order, stability, harmony – these were the charge and fulfilment of the mandate of Heaven.

a legacy in cloth – and skin

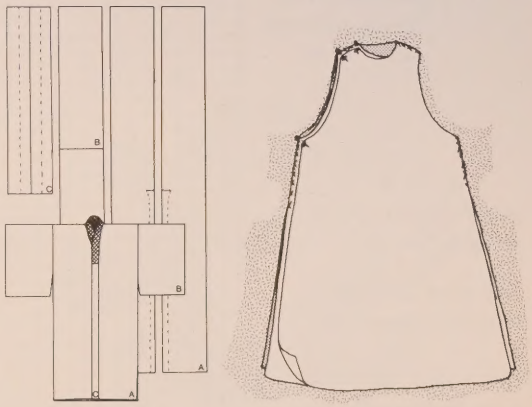
Traditional garments often serve as the collective memory of a people's history. By tracing developments in garment construction and style, costume history can enable us to appreciate and possibly to understand past cultures better.

From literary sources and historical data it is possible to distinguish two costume traditions in China – one based on cloth, the other on animal skins. On the Chinese plains rectilinear pieces of woven cloth encouraged the formation of garments with geometric shapes to minimize waste. The use of additional yardage to create flowing garments marked prestige and wealth. On the steppe the more restricted shapes of animal skins imposed garment traditions which were more form-fitting. Wealth was not indicated by costume size.

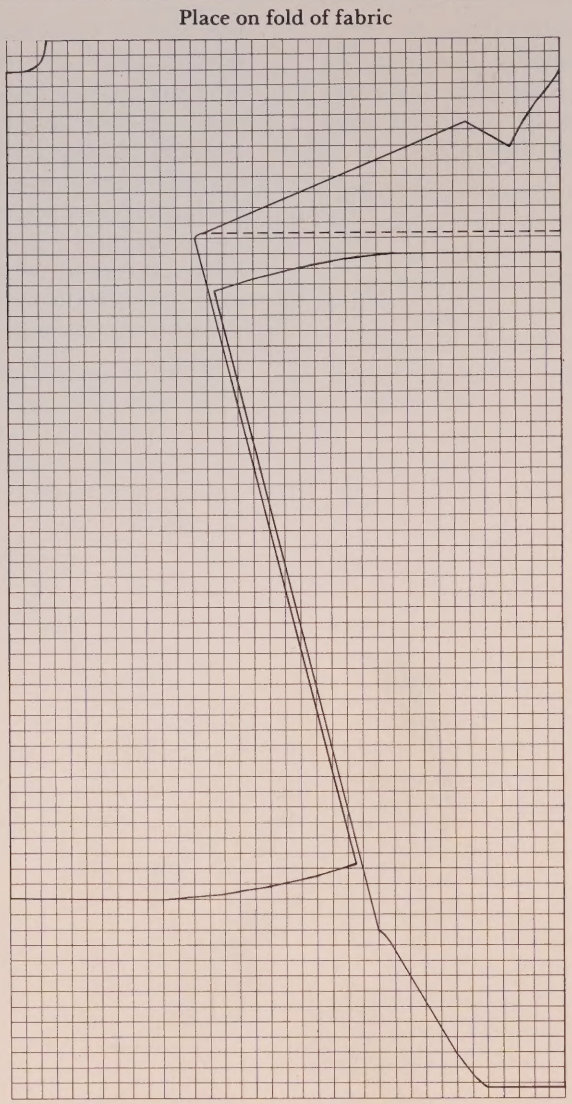
Both steppe and plains traditions survived in Ch'ing Dynasty costume, but neither nomadic Manchu styles nor urban Chinese styles existed in isolation. Chinese cultural history has been interpreted in terms of recurring cycles of native development and nomadic intrusion, but care must be taken not to polarize these influences. Nomadic and agrarian traditions were only two aspects of a larger phenomenon.

The Manchu were aware that the many nomadic conquerors who preceded them had eventually been assimilated by the Chinese. To avoid a similar fate, the Manchu attempted to stress cultural attributes which emphasized ethnic differences. Among these were language and custom, but probably the most visible distinction was costume. By replacing the ample flowing coats of the Ming Chinese with the boots, trousers, and riding coats of nomadic horsemen, the Manchu made the queue – the long braid of hair – and their national dress, symbols of authority. Although they imposed costume regulation on a much larger Chinese population, the Manchu were forced to concede some of their independence for the political expediencies of ruling the empire. In doing this they became more like their Chinese subjects, thereby setting the course for assimilation.

Man may manufacture clothing for a whole range of sociological, cultural, environmental, and technological reasons, but eventually clothes make the man. In traditional China clothing created style, marked status, and promoted identity.



your own dragon robe



pattern designed for
36" wide fabric

5/8" seam allowance
included throughout

each square represents
a one-inch square

...easy, simple, quick – and cosmic

construct your own connection with the universe... and remember – *one size fits all!*

Before you start, read these directions. We have based this pattern on 36" wide material. Don't worry about seam allowances; we have calculated 5/8" seam throughout.

You will need to determine the length of your coat. Measure from your shoulder to the desired hem length, and add four inches for second thoughts. Multiply this number by five to determine the total yardage you will need. If you select the tapered sleeve and horse-hoof cuff, prepare for your cosmic connection. If, on the other hand, you choose the full sleeve, prepare for gracious informality attuned to the seasons.

1. Enlarge the pattern on brown paper, tissue, or newspaper. Use yardstick and pencil to mark out a grid of six-inch squares. Transfer all markings from the diagram to the pattern, cut it out, and hold it up to your body to make sure it fits.

2. Cut two **Body** pieces following the directions on the diagram. Cut one **Front Flap** piece.

3. To assemble:

(a) Seam the left and right **Body** pieces together along the centre back seam only.

(b) Seam the **Front Flap** piece to the left front **Body** piece to form the centre front seam.

(c) Now, have fun and decorate your coat to suit your fancy. This is the time to do it, because it is easier to appliqué or attach trimmings if the coat is flat.

(d) Sew the underarm/side seams.

(e) The hem-line can be trimmed to the desired length – don't worry about a hem, the Chinese seldom did.

(f) Sleeve length can be adjusted by folding the sleeve into deep cuffs and tacking them in place. A contrasting lining looks very fine here.

(g) Bind all raw edges: neck, front flap, hem, and sleeve edges.

(h) Attach frog fasteners on the **Front Flap** piece and at corresponding positions on the right front **Body** of your coat at the neck, right clavicle, under the right arm, and along the right side seam.

(i) Put on your new coat, and experience the feeling of cosmic unity! But remember, with the mandate of Heaven comes an equal responsibility.

For more on Chinese clothing:

Cammann, Schuyler, *China's Dragon Robes,* New York, Ronald Press, 1952.

Few illustrations, but the best historical survey of this important Chinese garment yet written in English.

Vollmer, John E., *In the Presence of the Dragon Throne: Ch'ing Dynasty Costume (1644–1911) in the Royal Ontario Museum,* Toronto, Royal Ontario Museum, 1977.

A generously illustrated introduction which traces various aspects of the origins and developments of Ch'ing period costume, focusing on the cultural and social history of costume as well as its political significance.

For more on Chinese art:

Lee, Sherman E., *History of Far Eastern Art,* Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey and New York, Prentice-Hall and H.N. Abrams, n.d.

A well-illustrated survey of the arts of India, China, and Japan.

For more on Chinese history and the Ch'ing Dynasty:

Fairbank, John K. and Edwin O. Reischauer, *East Asia: The Great Tradition,* Vol. 1, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958.

Readable college text for introductory Oriental studies surveys, containing brief accounts of the historical, cultural, and social developments in China, Japan, and Korea.

Fitzgerald, C.P., *China: A Short Cultural History,* London, Cresset Press, 1950.

A well-balanced discussion of major Chinese cultural achievements within each traditional dynastic period.

Warner, Marina, *The Dragon Empress: Life and Times of Tz'u-hsi, 1835–1908, Empress Dowager of China,* London, Cardinal Press, 1974.

A good background to the period of one of the more remarkable figures of the Ch'ing Dynasty.

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We value your comments.

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